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Islamophobic Discourse of European Right-Wing Parties: A Narrative Policy Analysis

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Abstract

In Europe, in tandem with growing social anxiety regarding the so-called threat of Islamization, right-wing, populist parties have increasingly positioned themselves against Muslims and Islam to the point of becoming anti-Islam parties. This paper deconstructs Islamophobic discourses of the Freedom Party of Austria, the League, and the Alternative for Germany through narrative policy analysis and shows that they are built upon a similar narrative of a villain, victim, and hero. Muslims are depicted as villains that pose a threat to Europe, while national and European cultures are presented as victims, threatened by Islamic practices which are cast as irrational, dominant, and violence-prone. The depiction of Muslims as villains and European culture and society as victims gives these parties an opportunity to create a "hero" character for themselves. By presenting proposals, such as bans on Islamic practices, these parties narratively construct themselves as heroes determined to save their countries and European culture. Disregarding the heterogeneity of Muslims and Islamic traditions as well as the contribution of Muslim scientists and philosophers, these parties depict a simplistic picture of the world in which they appropriate for themselves the role of protector. Character construction in Islamophobic discourses raises important questions about multiculturalism, tolerance, and religious freedom in Europe.

Keywords

Islamophobia, right-wing populism, narrative policy analysis, the Freedom Party of Austria, the League, and Alternative for Germany

The 1990s witnessed the popularization of the term Islamophobia in conjunction with the growing stigmatization of Muslims in Western countries. Islamophobia refers to biased and negative sentiments or attitudes directed at Muslims and Islam (Bleich 2011). It is "a widespread mindset and fear-laden discourse in which people make blanket judgments of Islam as the enemy, as the 'other', as a dangerous and unchanged, monolithic bloc that is the natural subject of well-deserved hostility from Westerners" (Zúquete 2008: 323). It is built upon a

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particular worldview that treats Islam as a diseased, corrupt tradition that curbs freedom and fosters violence (Sharify-Funk, 2013) and which associates Muslims with violence, radicalism, female oppression, and irrationality (Goldberg 2009). Overall, Islamophobia is a broad phenomenon that has emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions (Stolz 2005).

Currently, the rise of Islamophobic sentiments has reached such a height that it has led some scholars to argue that Islamophobia and the problems regarding the integration of Muslims into Western societies are the defining characteristics of the twenty-first century (Shryock 2010). In Europe, Islamophobic views started to be crystallized around the 1990s (Mohammed, 2014; Zuquete 2008).[1] The 9/11 attacks, the 2004 Madrid and the 2005 London bombings, the Muhammad cartoons controversy, the mass refugee flows resulting from the intensification of the Syrian civil war (especially the 2015 refugee crisis), and the 2015 attacks in Paris (Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan shootings) all contributed to the rising Islamophobic sentiments in Europe (Klug 2012; Miera and Sala Pala 2009; Green 2015; Kallis 2018; Haynes 2019; 2020; Mohiuddin 2019; Dauvergne 2019; Mudde and Kalt-Wasser 2013). Indeed, the popularization of the term *Eurabia* in recent years epitomizes the fear among Europeans about the Islamization of Europe (Sharify-Funk 2013). Rising anti-Islam sentiments in Europe are visible with social movements against Muslims (such as Pediga-inspired social movements), alarming levels of discrimination in the work environment (Stasio et al. 2021), and the rising electoral gains of anti-Islam parties. The Great Replacement Theory, a conspiracy theory formulated in 2011 by Renaud Camus, a French writer, which propagates the belief that Europeans will be replaced by Middle Eastern and African immigrants in the future, is taking hold in the European social landscape.

The growing Islamophobic sentiments in Europe have allowed right-wing, populist parties to expand their voter base by tapping into growing anxiety toward Muslims in European societies through adopting Islamophobic discourse (Oztig et al. 2021). By the same token, these parties give more fuel to the growing Islamophobia, xenophobia, and intolerance with their discriminatory discourse (Wodak 2015). Islamophobic discourse, as used by these parties, labels Muslims as threats and emphasizes the irreconcilable differences between Europe and Muslims. While Europe is associated with reason and civilization, Muslims and Islam are associated with backwardness and oppression.

Existing scholarship analyzed Islamophobic discourse from the perspectives of cultural and racial dynamics. For example, Noble (2012) analyzes Islamophobic discourse in the context of cultural panic around Islam and Muslims. Mutman (2019) emphasizes the historical linkages between Orientalism (the West's imagined construction of the East) and the discursive and political formulation of Islamophobia. He further argues that while Islam is not a race, Islamophobia shares structural similarities with other types of racism through the construction of "a phantasmatic notion of Islamic threat" (Mutman 2019: 263). Mohiuddin (2019:135) highlights the racist feature of Islamophobic discourse on the grounds that "it upholds a system of Eurocentric supremacy, a historical development based on the universalising aspects of Western culture." Looking at Islamophobia within the context of racial dynamics in the United States, Love (2009; 2017) concludes that Islamophobic discourse is the product of, and contributes to, the racial ideology of the United States by placing Muslims under a Middle Eastern racial category.

Similarly, Allen (2010) treats Islamophobia as an ideology that is similar to racism in its purpose and function. Dawes (2021) and Garner and Selod (2015) concur that Islamophobic discourse is a racialized discourse that homogenizes and degrades Muslims. Associating Islamophobic discourse with a specific form of racism, Hafez (2014) underlines that Islamophobia has become an accepted form of racism not only among the supporters of the far-right in Europe but also in the mainstream.

On the whole, the majority of studies in the literature shed light on Islamophobic discourse by looking at cultural and racial dynamics.

Despite burgeoning scholarly interest in Islamophobia, little is known about character construction in Islamophobic discourse. This study advances our understanding of Islamophobia by analyzing the Islamophobic discourse of European right-wing parties from the lens of character archetypes: the villain, the victim, and the hero. By examining the Islamophobic discourse of three European right-wing parties, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPA), the League, and Alternative for Germany (AfG) through narrative policy analysis, this study argues that the Islamophobic discourse adopted by these parties is more than a right-wing, populist discourse that is built upon the othering of Muslims and the simplification of problems regarding Muslims and Islamization.

It is shown that European right-wing parties follow a similar narrative strategy in order to paint Muslims, Europeans, and themselves as certain characters. Muslims are depicted as villains that pose a grave danger to Europe. National and European cultural identities are shown as victims that face the threat of weakening or even extinction in the face of Islamic practices, which are considered irrational, dominant, and violence-prone. By presenting proposals such as bans on full-face veiling, the headscarf, the Muslim call to prayer, and the minarets, these parties portray themselves as heroes determined to save their countries from the so-called threat of Islamization. In other words, European right-wing parties tap into the rising Islamophobic sentiments and exaggerate and overlook certain dynamics to take on the narrative role of the hero to strengthen their voter base. By analyzing character construction in the Islamophobic discourse of European right-wing political parties, this article adds to the understanding of Islamophobia in the discourse and praxis of the contemporary radical right in Europe.

Right-Wing Populism and Islamophobic Discourse

Growing anti-Islam sentiments among the European public have led to the reshaping of the European ideological, social, and electoral landscape (Mohammed 2014). In tandem with these developments, recent years have witnessed the intertwinement of populism and Islamophobia in Europe in the form of Islamophobic populism. On average, European populist right-wing parties increased their votes from 2% in 1985 to 8.5% in 2006 (Ellinas 2010). In addition to increasing their votes and fostering more Islamophobic sentiments among the public, these parties affect the political climate in Europe by pushing centrist political parties to the right on issues concerning Islam, Muslims, and immigration (Green 2015). After shedding light on the basic tenets of right-wing populism, this section will evaluate Islamophobia in the context of right-wing populist discourse.

Even though there is no clear-cut definition of populism in the literature, populism has several distinguishing characteristics. It is built upon a simplistic discourse that divides society into two opposing camps: the elites and the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). It denigrates the elites as corrupt and positively valorizes the people (Kriesi 2014). The accountability issues in democracies and the growing distance of political institutions from ordinary citizens (Calhoun 1988) have created permissive conditions for the rise of populist politics. Populist politicians claim to be the proper representatives of the ordinary people and mobilize people by evoking their economic and social burdens and their exclusion from the political system (Betz 1994; Taggart 1996).

Reflecting popular grievances in the political arena, populism promises ordinary people a better future (Canovan 1999). In Elchardus and Spruyt's words (2014: 16), populism is "a politics that expresses the hope that where established parties and elites have failed, ordinary folk, common sense, and the politicians who give them a voice can find solutions, halt the decline, return to the heartland, to a society that in retrospect - a no doubt partly nostalgic and romanticized retrospect -seems good and just." It targets the status quo with its vision of radical transformation (Betz and Johnson 2004).

Populist leaders adopt undiplomatic and negative language. They depict a worldview according to which the "other" is considered an enemy (Mudde 2004). Their discourse is marked by anti-intellectualism (Wodak 2015). Most populist policies are pragmatic, as they offer simple, short-term solutions to complex problems (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004). Importantly, populism lacks the intellectual strength with which major political ideologies (such as liberalism and socialism) are associated (Mudde 2004). It is characterized by a limited morphology, lending itself susceptible to its attachment to and even assimilation into major political ideologies (Mudde and Kalt-Wasser 2013).

While there are right-wing parties that are not populists and left-wing populist parties, many populist parties are located on the right of the political spectrum (Mény & Surel 2002). To put it crudely, left-wing populist political parties are inclined toward internationalism and focus on class inequalities, and right-wing populist political parties are generally nationalist/chauvinist and prioritize socio-cultural issues (Wodak 2015; Rydgren 2018). That said, right and left-wing populist parties converge both in the way that they present themselves as the genuine voice of the people (Haynes 2020).

Since the 1980s, an increasing number of radical right-wing populist parties successfully secured permanent positions in the party systems in Europe and shaped public debates ranging from immigration to citizenship (Betz and Johnson 2004). Right-wing populist parties share several distinguishable characteristics. They position themselves against multiculturalism and internationalism (Pelinka 2013; Rydgren 2018). Differing from fascist and right-wing extremist parties in the past, they neither aim to abolish a democratic regime nor carry a vision to create a new individual (Betz and Johnson 2004). Even though they do not utter their opposition to democracy, they question the functioning of democratic institutions and present themselves as the proper representatives of democracy (Rydgren 2018). They claim that democratic institutions are grasped by the elites that follow their agenda at the expense of ordinary citizens' interests (Rydgren 2018). They aim to increase their votes by raising particular emotions, such as anger and hate among the people (see Demertzis 2006). Their aggressive discourse poses significant challenges to a liberal democracy through disparaging norms, institutions, and procedures essential to liberal democracy (Betz and Johnson 2004).

Right-wing populism associates the people with the ethnic community and adopts an exclusionary attitude toward non-ethnic elements (Canovan 2002; Mudde 2007). It is built upon an assumption that certain groups, that cannot be integrated into society, pose a threat to the way of life of national majorities (Betz and Johnson 2004). It postulates that inter-ethnic mixing will lead to cultural extinction (Griffin 2000) and immigrants should either assimilate or leave (Betz and Johnson 2004). Immigration is associated with crime, unemployment, and the weakening of cultural identity (Schumuck and Matthes 2015; Zaslove 2004). Right-wing populist discourse pits ordinary people against refugees, immigrants, and ethnic and religious minorities (Taggart 1996; Canovan 2002; Muller 2016) and focuses on the right of national majorities to safeguard their cultural identity (Rydgren 2018). It supports the view that national majorities should be prioritized by the government with receiving jobs, housing, and health care (Rydgren 2018).

In tandem with growing Islamophobic sentiments among the public, European right-wing, populist parties have incorporated anti-Islam discourse. According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2018), 48% of Austrians, 53% of Italians, 44% of Germans, 34% of France, and 42% of the Swiss believe that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with their national culture and values. The 2022 report of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) reveals that Europe takes the lead in Islamophobia worldwide in terms of discrimination and policy-related issues (Organization of Islamic Cooperation 2022). The 2021 European Islamophobia report reveals how Islamophobia is becoming normalized in many European

countries. For example, it indicates that in the overwhelming majority of European states Islamophobic incidents are not recorded in the category of hate crime (Bayrakli and Hafez 2017).

While certain events such as 9/11 instigated Islamophobic sentiments on the continent, the dynamics of Islamophobia transcend monocausal, eventual explanations. These dynamics are also linked to identity issues in Europe. For example, Betz and Meret (2009) argue that threat perception against Muslims enables Europe to reassert and solidify its own identity. Bunzl (2005) makes an interesting contrast between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Europe, noting that while anti-Semitism in the late 19th century was a response in defense of an ethnically based nation-state, in today's world, Islamophobia is a response in defense of a supranational European identity.

With their claim that Muslims pose a threat to Europe with their deliberate intentions to wipe out European identity and national cultures (Mohammed 2014), European right-wing parties tap into and fuel Islamophobic sentiments in Europe. Against the backdrop of growing frustration toward the Muslim presence in Europe, these parties use Islamophobic discourse as a vote-maximization strategy (Oztig et al. 2021). As underlined previously, these parties have increased their votes from the 1980s onward. However, recent years have witnessed an exponential rise in their votes. 2017 was a landmark year for the electoral victory of right-wing populism in Europe with the entry of the AfD to the Bundestag for the first time, the FPA's joining the governing coalition, and the Party for Freedom becoming the second-largest party in the Dutch parliament.

Currently, Islamophobia constitutes the most distinguishing characteristic of European right-wing, populist politics. Right-wing populist politicians repeatedly highlight the differences between the Christian and Muslim worlds (Haynes 2019; 2020). Islamic practices are stereotypically associated with extremism, irrationality, intolerance, and the suppression of women's rights. At the same time, these politicians adopt discursive tactics to counter the accusations of racism and right-wing extremism by justifying the exclusion of Muslims and Islamic practices in terms of self-defense, stressing that they tell uncomfortable truths that many people secretly think (Betz and Johnson 2004). By employing "politics of fear" (Wodak 2015), right-wing politicians claim to be the only real political force that is willing and capable of protecting the national majority's ethnocultural and religious identity (Betz and Johnson 2004).

As seen above, Islamophobic discourse employed by European right-wing parties is a typical right-wing populist discourse that is built upon a stark distinction between Europeans and the Muslim other. It lumps together Muslims and Islam into a single category that is associated with negative connotations. It promises people a future in which either Muslims are completely assimilated into their host countries or leave. This article makes a novel contribution to the scholarship on right-wing politics, populism, and Islamophobia by showing that the Islamophobic discourse employed by European right-wing populist parties is based on particular character constructions. The analysis refracted through the prism of narrative policy analysis adds nuance to the conventional narrative of Islamophobia and the contemporary radical right. The following section explains case selection and methodology.

Case Selection and Methodology

The FPA, the League, and the AfG are selected for analysis as typical cases of European, right-wing populist parties. With their anti-Muslim comments and policy proposals, these parties provide relevant cases for the study of Islamophobia in the context of right-wing populist discourse. These parties share several similarities. All of them align Europe with Christianity (Zaslove 2004; Alternative for Germany 2017). While they primarily opposed immigration and multiculturalism, in recent years, they have turned their attention to Islam to the point of becoming anti-Islam parties and have exponentially increased their votes. On the other

hand, these parties have several differences. The FPA is the oldest among these parties and differs from the other two parties due to its Nazi roots. The League first emerged as a regionalist/separatist party that advocated the secession of North Italy from Rome, evolving later to become a nationalist party (Bull and Gilbert 2001). Among the three parties, the AfG is the newest one which was created as a Eurosceptic alternative to the pro-European Christian Democratic Union. Its ideological and rhetorical profile became aligned with right-wing populism, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis (Lees 2018). Differing from the FPA and the League, the AfG has never joined a government coalition before.

This study adopts the method of narrative policy analysis to deconstruct these parties' Islamophobic discourse. More specifically, narrative policy analysis provides a framework within which to analyze the character construction in Islamophobic discourses of the FPA, the League, and the AfG. Narrative policy analysis is an approach to the study of the roles of narratives in policy-making processes (Jones and McBeth 2010). It has roots in the linguistic turn in policy analysis that "has refocused analytic attention on the ways in which language itself constitutes the social 'reality' analysts are studying" (Yanow 2007: 116; see also Miller 2020). It is built upon the assumption that humans prefer to think and speak in story forms (*homo narrans model of the individual*) (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018).

According to this approach, narratives contain generalizable structural elements, construct and reconstruct social reality by framing policy problems in particular ways, and play key roles in human cognition and communication (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018; Hajer 1993). More specifically, narrative policy analysis looks at "the policy world through a social construction lens, embracing the notion that policy problems and the entire policy process strongly depend on the meanings attached to them by the actors involves" (Jones and Radelli 2015: 341).

Narratives structure and communicate the understanding of the world (Shannan, Jones, and McBeth 2011). They simplify the uncertain and complicated world (Roe 1994). They "bring tension and suspense, compelling notice and interest" by telling "a compelling story that makes sense of the world" (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018: 2). Beliefs, cultural codes, and contextual conditions affect the meaning attributed to narrative objects (Jones and Radelli 2015). In the political arena, narratives serve as powerful strategies that construct social problems (Jasper, Young, and Zuern 2018) and draw public support (Oliver and Johnston 2000). They are the visible outcomes of political strategizing (McBeth et al. 2007). Overall, according to the narrative policy framework, policy narratives are strategically constructed and externally communicated to legitimize a certain course of action (Jones and McBeth 2010; McBeth and Shanahan 2004).

Characters constitute the building blocks of narratives. They draw a sharp line between a narrative and a non-narrative, such as a chronology or a report (Shanahan et al. 2013). Character constructions enable narrators to mold policy realities in certain ways: to persuade people and dampen or deepen conflict (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018). Characters could be individuals, a group of people, institutions, or abstractions (Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014). Characters are oversimplifications that emphasize certain dynamics while disregarding many complexities (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018). They are stereotyped in order to create an emotional effect and motivate action (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018; Jasper, Young, and Zuern 2018). Indeed, numerous studies suggest that individual characters invoke more empathy than abstract categories (see Bloom 2016; Slovic 2007).

In general, narratives are built upon three archetypes: "villains" (the cause of the problem), "victims" (harmed by a problem), and "heroes" (who bring a solution to the policy problem). A villain is created with the attachment of a negative marker. Villains are presented as malevolent actors (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018). They attract blame for their actions that harm victims (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018). By invoking negative emotions, such as fear and hate, villains lead to the

solidification of in-group (us) vs. out-group (them) boundaries (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018).

Victims are cast as good and in need of protection (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018). Narratives usually instill fear through phrases, such as "if we do/don't do this, then that will happen" (Jones and Radelli 2015: 341), and contain policy solutions. Policy solutions outline how victims could be protected from villains (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018). In narratives, heroes show determination to fix the problem by implementing specific policies (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018). They are portrayed as strong and well-intentioned actors who would set things right and protect the victims (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018).

All in all, narratives shape and distort policy realities by depicting a simplified and exaggerated version of policy issues. Based on the theoretical framework of villain–hero–victims, this study brings a novel insight into the study of Islamophobia by arguing that right-wing actors in Europe employ a specific narrative strategy of character construction to receive popular support for electoral votes. The following sections illustrate how radical right-wing parties in Europe build upon Islamophobic sentiments and simplify and overlook certain dynamics to construct a triumvirate of villains, victims, and heroes.

Case Studies

This section gives a brief overview of the FPA, the League, and the AfG by paying particular attention to their establishment, evolution, political positions, and electoral successes. This section documents the ways in which these parties construct Islam and Muslims as well as their policy proposals to prevent the "Islamization of Europe." This analysis relies on secondary sources: statements of party leaders, party members, and election manifestos.

The Freedom Party of Austria

The FPA was established in 1956 by Anton Reinthaller, a former Nazi leader (Bridge Initiative Team 2020). The party had a nationalist and liberal economic focus (Wolf 2016). Until the 1980s, the party was a non-mainstream, opposition party. After Jorg Haider became the chairperson in 1986, the party underwent a significant transformation, becoming one of Europe's first strong right-wing, populist parties. Haider associated increases in crime with uncontrolled immigration (Zaslove 2004). He specifically targeted Turkish, former Yugoslavian, and African immigrants (Bridge Initiative Team 2020). The party's anti-Islam position crystallized in the 1990s with Haider's book (Freedom I Mean) which focuses on an inherent contradiction between Islam and the Western world (Bridge Initiative Team 2020). The party's 1997 political platform linked the foundation of Europe to Christianity (Zaslove 2004).

The FPA received 26.9% of the votes in the 1999 elections and established a coalition with the conservative Austrian People's Party. Especially after the 9/11 attacks, the party supported toughening immigration laws that are claimed to be the reason for the entry of terrorists and criminals. As a result of the FPA's efforts, quotas for less-skilled workers were abolished (Zaslove 2004). The party's anti-Islam stance became more visible in its later years in government, as it repeatedly stressed the threat of Islamization in Europe and called for the restriction and ban on Islamic practices, such as halal slaughtering (Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou 2013).

Strache became the FPA's leader in 2005. He emphasized his Christian identity and presented himself as a defender of Austrian culture and tradition, security, and welfare chauvinism. He blatantly positioned himself against immigration and Turkey's accession to the EU. In the 2006 parliamentary elections, the party's slogan was "No home for Islam" and "Free women instead of compulsory veiling." In the 2008 Tyrol regional elections, the party adopted the slogan "the sound of church bells instead of muezzin song." In the European Parliament elections in 2009, the party's slogan was "Occident in the hands of Christians" (Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou 2013).

In 2007, Strache stated that "Islamism is the Fascism of the 21st century" and argued that Islam is not a religion but a legal and social

totalitarian system (Bridge Initiative Team 2019). In the same year, he participated in a protest against the construction of a mosque in Cologne, organized by Pro Cologne, a far-right party. Strache directly quoted a German journalist (Henryk Broder) by saying "[t]he difference between Islam and Islamism is the same as the one between terror and terrorism" (quoted in Bridge Initiative Team 2019).

The party frequently invited anti-Islam figures to its seminars (Bridge Initiative Team 2020). It established the "European City Alliance against Islamization," together with the Belgian Vlaams Belang party and Pro-Cologne, a regional German right-wing party (Bridge Initiative Team 2019), in 2008. This platform portrayed Islamization not only as a local threat but also as a threat to the entire European continent (Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou 2013). The FPA released a policy paper titled "We and Islam" which states that Islam is not a part of Austrian and European culture. It is suggested that imams should be trained by state institutions, sworn into the Austrian constitution, and should give their sermons in German. Islamic schools should be supervised, and Islamic textbooks should be checked for democratic content. Mosques (cast as the recruiting sites for extremist movements) should be controlled, and the building of minarets should be banned. The citizenship of those who propagate Sharia law should be revoked (FPA 2008).

Other FPA officials followed in Strache's footsteps and adopted harsh anti-Islam rhetoric. For example, on her campaign trail for local elections, the FPA candidate Susanne Winter suggested the banishment of Islam back over the Mediterranean Sea (Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou 2013). Andreas Mölzer, the party's senior official, argued that "an immigrant Muslim cannot be entitled to the same rights as were granted to Muslim Bosnians during [the Austro-Hungarian] monarchy" (quoted in Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou 2013: 159). In 2010, the FPA signed Jerusalem Declaration with Vlaams Belang and the AfD which states that "We stand at the vanguard in the fight for the Western, democratic community against the totalitarian threat of fundamentalist Islam" (quoted in Hafez 2015).

Strache's polarizing strategy paid off in electoral contests. In 2008, 2013, and 2017 parliamentary elections, the party exponentially increased its votes, receiving 17.5%, 20.5%, and 26% of the votes, respectively. The FPA and Austrian People's Party formed a coalition government in 2017 and Strache became Vice-Chancellor. The coalition government adopted an anti-Islam rhetoric and launched a campaign against political Islam. The coalition government targeted the Islamic Religious Authority of Austria. While previously the state partially funded its services such as religious education in public schools, and the training of religion teachers, the coalition government framed these services in the context of Islamism (Hafez 2019). The ban on full-faced veiling (imposed previously by the centrist government of Chancellor Christian Kern in universities, courts, and public transport) was extended to primary schools. In 2018, the coalition government ordered the closure of seven mosques (which was later revoked by the courts). It announced its decision to expel imams funded by Turkey consistent with the 2015 Law on Islam that forbids foreign funding for Islamic organizations (Eddy 2018). The coalition government collapsed in 2019 and Strache resigned from the leadership. Norbert Hofer took over the FPA's leadership. In the 2019 elections, the party's votes decreased to 16%, a sharp contrast to the 2017 elections. Hofer continued the party's anti-Islam line. During the pandemic, he went so far as to claim that Quran is more dangerous than COVID-19 (Daily Sabah 2020).

The League

The Northern League party dates back to Lega Venata (established in 1979) which became Lega Lombardia in 1984 (Spektorowski 2003). The Northern League was established by Umberto Bossi in 1991. It emerged as an ethno-regionalist party with its advocacy for the self-determination of Italy's northern regions (Bull and Gilbert 2001). It portrayed

itself as a defender against the Italian bureaucratic state, the political elites, the underdeveloped South, and immigrants. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, it portrayed immigration from the south of Italy as a threat. From the late 1990s onward, it started to target albanians, Romanians, and Muslims (Fella and Ruzza 2006).

The Northern League aimed to appeal to voters with its claim that the centralization of political authority and economic resources was detrimental to northern regional interests (Spektorowski 2003). It stressed that lenient immigration policies eventually result in the mistreatment of Italians in their own country (Zaslove 2004). In its electoral campaigns, it used the images of migrants on boats to increase fear of "invasion" (Fella and Ruzza 2006). The party attacked the immigration law (passed in 1998) that gave immigrants full rights and played an essential role in the adoption of stricter immigration legislation in 2002 (Zaslove 2004). In its 2008 electoral campaign, the party's slogan was "Let's close our borders" (Brunazzo and Roux 2013). Regarding immigration, the party supported the prioritization of Catholic immigrants, children, and grandchildren of Italian emigrants (Zaslove 2004).

After Matteo Salvini became the leader of the party in 2013, the party has undergone a dramatic change. With his objective to appeal to voters from diverse regions, Salvini dropped the party's regionalist orientation, making it a national party (Pellegrino 2019). The change of the party's name from the Northern League to the League in 2018 is indicative of the party's widening approach. Salvini aimed to mobilize people against illegal immigration, the EU, and unemployment (Padovani 2018). In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the League received 17.4% of the votes and established a coalition with the populist Five Star Movement. Salvini became the Deputy Prime Minister and played a key role in the adoption of restrictive asylum and immigration policies.

Before Salvini, the League showed Islamophobic tendencies. For example, La Padania published anti-Islam articles and the party's official pamphlets showed full-veiled women to warn of the danger of "Islamic invasion" (Avanza 2010). Yet, under Salvini, anti-Islam has become the party's defining characteristic. Salvini argued that Europe is under the threat of Islamization by emphasizing that "the Continent is losing its values, it is lacking in security, it is losing its identity and has no pride anymore" (quoted in King, 2017). During his election campaign in 2018, Salvini stressed the incompatibility between Islam and the Italian constitution and promised to close mosques and to not allow any new ones to open (Gostoli 2018).

He argued that Islam is antithetical to freedom and Italy's values by saying that "[t]he fundamental cultural question is whether Islam, as in the literal application of the sayings of Mohamed, is today compatible with our values, our liberty, and our constitution. I have very grave doubts" (quoted in Squires 2018). He underlined that Islam is not a religion but a law (Squires 2018). He also warned against the possibility that if Islamization is not stopped, Italy might end up like the UK in which the sharia courts operate (Squires 2018) and centuries of Italian history might disappear (Balmer 2018). In 2018, the League leaders prevented a Muslim association from transforming a former hospital chapel into a mosque in the Lombardy region. In the wake of a deadly attack on a New Zealand mosque in 2019, Salvini reiterated his claim that Islamic extremism is the only threat that Italy faces (The New Arab 2019).

In his visit to Hungary's far-right leader in 2019, Victor Orban, Matteo Salvini called people to vote for the nationalist parties in the European elections by highlighting the risk of "an Islamic caliphate in Europe" (Rahim, 2019). Salvini protested against the transformation of the Hagia Sophia museum in Istanbul (which was initially built as a Byzantium church) into a mosque, quibbling that if no step is taken, Milan's cathedral could be transformed into a mosque one day (Hughes 2020). Salvini stepped down from his government

position after the coalition government fell apart in 2019.

Alternative for Germany

The AfG was founded by Bernd Lucke, Alexander Gauland, Konrad Adam, Wolfgang Fuhl, and Gerd Robanus as a right-wing, populist party in the run-up to the 2013 federal election in protest over Germany's commitment to Greece's recovery following the 2008 financial crisis. Its name was a response to Merkel's assertion that her policies have no alternative (Arzheimer 2019). After its establishment, it quickly appealed to voters. It received 4.7% of the votes in the 2013 federal election. It joined European Conservative and Reformist Group (a center-right political group in the European Parliament) a year later.

The party initially took an anti-EU stance, opposing the euro along with Germany's economic support to Southern European countries. Following Merkel's decision to open Germany's doors to undocumented migrants and refugees during the 2015 refugee crisis, the party shifted its focus from the economy to Islamophobia and immigration (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Gedmin 2019). Tapping into growing anti-Muslim sentiments, the AfG increased its votes. It received 12.6% of the votes in the 2017 federal elections and became Germany's third-largest party with its 94 seats in Bundestag (Clarke 2017; BBC News 2020).

Frauke Petry, who chaired the party between 2015 and 2017, heavily criticized the Merkel government's refugee policies and adopted incendiary rhetoric toward Muslims and immigrants (Gedmin 2019). Petry argued that Muslim newcomers have different attitudes toward gender issues, employment, and customs (Gedmin 2019). She suggested that the AfG should follow the steps of the FPA (Arzheimer 2019). Alice Weidel, one of the leaders of the AFD, argued that "Islam is not a religion like Catholic or Protestant Christianity, but rather always associated intellectually with the takeover of a state" (quoted in Scally 2016). She defined the hijab as a sexist symbol and compared it to apartheid. She stressed that "the headscarf doesn't belong in Germany" and suggested that people who wear the hijab should be fined (quoted in Schumacher 2017). By referring to the Islamization of Germany, she portrayed the AfG as a defender of traditional Christian values (Deutsche Welle 2017). Gauland, the co-founder of the AfG, evaluated Muslim immigration as an "Islamic invasion" and noted that Muslims jeopardize the "German way of life" (Friedman 2017). He demanded an immediate restriction on Muslim immigration (Bayrakli and Hafez 2017). In another speech, he went on to argue that Germany was being "Islamified" and that the AfG was a bulwark for traditional Christian values (Deutsche Welle 2017).

In the AfG's election manifesto, there are two sections entitled "Islam and its tense relationship with our value system" and "Islam does not belong to Germany." In the first section, Islamic practice is portrayed as a threat to the German liberal-democratic constitutional order and Germany's Judeo-Christian and humanist roots. In the second section, the increasing number of Muslims in Germany is presented as a threat to the German state, society, and values. Furthermore, the AfD demands an end to parallel Islamic societies that have courts with sharia laws and religious radicalization amongst Muslims (Alternative for Germany 2017). The AfD also calls for an end to the financing of mosques by Islamic countries, claiming that it leads to the Islamization of Germany and curbs the process of the integration of Muslim residents. It is stated that imams who wish to preach in Germany should commit themselves to the German constitutional order and must preach mostly in German. The AfD also calls for the abolishment of theological chairs for Islam studies at German universities and the transfer of positions to the faculty of non-denominational religious studies (Alternative for Germany 2017).

In its electoral manifesto, the AfD pits Christian churches of modernity against mosques by depicting the first as institutions that are committed to the tolerant coexistence of religions and the minaret and the Muslim call to prayer as a symbol of Islamic supremacy which

starkly contradicts religious toleration. The party positions itself against Islamic organizations' gaining public body status claiming that they seek to expand their power. The party also calls for a full-face veil ban in public spaces and public service by stressing that it curbs cultural integration and social coexistence. The party also positions itself against the headscarf, describing it as a symbol of inequality between Muslim women and men which has harmful consequences for women's rights and the development of the individual. The party demands a headscarf ban at schools, specifying that teachers and students should not be allowed to wear the headscarf (Alternative for Germany 2017). The AfD's stereotypes of Muslims are also reflected in its election posters in which Muslims are ridiculed and shamed. Images of radicalized Muslims contribute to the AfD's discourse that labels Muslims as invaders and oppressors and the party presents itself as a savior of Western civilization from the threat of Muslim migrants (Doer 2021).

Character Construction in Islamophobic Discourse

Despite their different paths of evolution, the discourses of the FPA, the League, and the AfG show a similar pattern. These parties employ populist discourse with their undiplomatic and negative language, the "us" versus "them" distinction, and the simplification of the complex problems of the world (Canovan, 1999; Mudde 2004). In tandem with the recent growth in Islamophobic sentiments among the public, these parties' populist tendencies have been crystallized around Islamophobia. Their anti-Islam discourses are built upon the juxtaposition of Islam and the West; Islamic practices and European values. Islam is not treated as a religion, but as a law, a totalitarian ideology, antithetical to freedom, democracy, and gender equality. The FPA, the League, and the AfG employ typical populist discourse that shows xenophobic and racist characteristics. This study brings a novel perspective to the study of Islamophobia by showing that these parties mold Islamophobic sentiments to construct particular characters: the villain, the victim, and the hero.

In these parties' discourses, Islam and Muslims are presented as villains that pose a threat to national cultures and European civilization through increasing visibility and spread of Islamic practices, such as halal slaughtering, veiling, and minarets. As documented in the case study section, Strache, the previous leader of the FPA, associated Islamism with fascism and terrorism, going so far as to declare that Islam is not a religion but a totalitarian system (Balmer 2018; Bridge Initiative Team 2019). The current FPA leader, Hofer, maintained the villain narrative by claiming that Islam is more threatening than the coronavirus which took millions of lives (Daily Sabah 2020). Salvini, the current leader of the League, adopts a similar villain narrative regarding Islam and Muslims by associating Muslim immigration with the so-called threats of Sharia and the caliphate (Balmer 2018; Rahim, 2019). Weidel, one of the leaders of the AFD, compared Islamic practices to those of apartheid and underlined the risk of an Islamic takeover of Germany (Scally 2016; Schumacher 2017). In a similar vein, Gauland, the co-founder of the AfG, vilified Muslims by calling them "invaders" who put in danger the German way of life (Friedman 2017).

As seen from the above statements, these parties describe Muslims as villains and actors who possess the deliberate intention to take over their state. By not accepting Islam as a religion, but as a political system, they directly suggest that all Muslims have a political agenda and that by practicing their religion, they intentionally aim to inflict harm on European societies. By lumping together Muslims living in Europe into one basket and overlooking their levels of religiosity, education, and social integration, these parties reserve the villain character for Muslims. In other words, Muslims are stereotyped in order to create an emotional effect of fear and hatred. While Islamophobic parties in Europe remain silent in the face of mosque attacks in Europe and other parts of the world and human rights violations due to Saudi-led coalitions' strikes in Yemen,

they simplify and exaggerate problems associated with Muslims in order to weaken the distinction between peaceful and radical Muslims.

The Islamophobic discourse of European right-wing parties is built upon the foundational belief that there is one Islamic worldview. It labels this worldview as irrational, dominant, and violence-prone. This discourse overlooks the vast differences between different Islamic traditions. For example, the way Sufi Islam (Muslim mysticism) interprets Islam is fundamentally different from that of Wahhabism. While Sufism focuses on the spiritual experience of God's divine essence (Atay 2012), Wahhabism (the most conservative school of thought in Sunni Islam) rejects religious interpretations and focuses solely on the Quran and Sunnah (sayings and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) (Baer 2017; Thomas 2006; Schanzer and Miller 2002). European right-wing parties overwhelmingly draw on certain Islamic images and practices to create an image for all Muslims while deliberately overlooking which Islamic tradition Muslim immigrants are socialized into and whether they possess varied identities. Their narrative rests on the faulty assumption that all Muslims aspire to change Europe in a certain direction.

Among 25 million Muslims in Europe, there are indigenous Muslim population in the Balkan countries; Muslim students and business people; Muslims who came from former European colonies without restriction (e.g., Algerians in France); Muslim immigrants who came to Europe since the 1960s; and Muslim asylum seekers and refugees who arrived in Europe following the Syrian civil war (Khader 2015). Research shows that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Europe are not involved in radical activities (Cordesman 2017, Congressional Research Service 2011).

European right-wing parties immediately jump to the conclusion that radicalization among Muslims is the result of Islam. They make no mention of the deleterious consequences of European imperialism, dictatorships in the Muslim states, economic, political, and social marginalization of Muslims, as well as micro-level factors in radicalization such as certain personality traits. For example, numerous studies found a positive association between heightened anxiety, aggression, impulsiveness, and involvement in extremism (Gotzsche-Astrup 2018; Meloy and Pollard 2017). The study of Coid et al. (2016) indicates a connection between dissocial personality patterns, previous acts of violence, and extremist beliefs. Indeed, 60% of Syrians who were radicalized in Germany are found to have been previously involved in violent crimes (Bundeskriminalamt, Bundesamt fur Verfassungsschutz, and HKE 2016). Another study conducted on a sample of European jihadis concluded a similar result (Basra, Neumann, and Brunner 2016). All in all, by exaggerating certain practices and images as well as overlooking fundamental dynamics, European right-wing parties construct and feed off of a distorted image of Muslims.

The villain character in Islamophobic discourse is inextricably linked to the victim character. In parallel to the vilification of Islam and Muslims, these parties portray European culture and societies as victims of Islamization. They convey strong messages of fear, disruption, and loss of control. Islam and Europe are cast in zero-sum terms. The presence of Muslims and the visibility of Islamic symbols in Europe are directly associated with the weakening of European culture and societies. For example, the platform called the "European City Alliance against Islamization," established by the FPA and other anti-Islam parties, focused on the threat of Islamization on the entire European continent (Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou 2013). By the same token, Salvini argued that with Muslim immigration, Europe is losing its identity, values, and pride (King 2017). He even went as far as to claim that Muslim immigration might in the long run wipe out the entire Italian history (Balmer 2018). The members of the AFG repeatedly stress that traditional Christian values, the German way of life, and German culture are under threat due to Muslims (Friedman 2017; Deutsche Welle 2017). Overall, these parties predict a future in which national citizens lose control

and their country falls under the control of Islamists. In this context, national cultures, liberal-democratic order, European identity, and civilization are portrayed as the victim character, being considered on the brink of extinction due to the dominant Islamic culture.

The portrayal of Islam and Muslims as villains and European culture and society as victims allows European right-wing parties an opportunity to create a "hero" character for themselves. In other words, these parties describe themselves as heroes determined to save European culture and society from the threat of Islam. Through the vilification of Muslims, European right-wing parties aim to attract the voters' attention and raise their popularity. They imply that if no immediate actions are taken, Europe might lose its identity and turn into Eurabia. For example, the Jerusalem Declaration, signed by the FPA, Vlaams Belang, and the AfD, underlines these parties' determination to fight against Islamization (Hafez 2015). European right-wing parties substantiate their hero character by proposing clear-cut solutions to the problem of Islamization, such as the headscarf ban, the ban on minarets, and Muslim immigration. They promise people to fix the problems related to Islam and Muslims by constructing themselves as protectors of their countries' security, values, and welfare. All in all, fitting Muslims into a particular character aids in these parties' character construction. The construction of the villain character of the Muslims enables these parties to accentuate their motivation, strength, and determination.

The triumvirate of villains, victims, and heroes is not idiosyncratic to the three parties analyzed in this article. The same pattern is also visible in other anti-Islam parties in Europe. For example, Javier Ortega Smith, secretary-general of Vox (a Spanish right-wing party), stated that "[o]ur common enemy, the enemy of Europe, the enemy of progress, the enemy of democracy, the enemy of family, the enemy of life, the enemy of the future is called the Islamist invasion." He implied that Islamization poses a long-term threat to Europe by mentioning a future scenario in which churches are replaced by mosques (Gonzales 2019). The British National Party (BNP) touched upon the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West as its key campaign theme (Ye'or 2005). In 2001, the Danish People's Party made Islam a key theme for its election campaign, claiming that Islam was not a religion but a political program that promoted medieval practices (Betz and Johnson 2004).

The Dutch Freedom Party, the National Front in France, and The Belgian Vlaams Belang Party are also right-wing, populist parties that turned into anti-Islam parties. Filip Dewinter, a member of Vlaams Belang, claimed that Islam was more dangerous than Nazism and suggested that keeping the number of Muslims to a minimum in Europe is essential for the maintenance of European identity (Shroufi 2015). Hungary's prime minister Victor Orban justified Hungary's closed-door policy toward refugees noting that "Hungary does not want Muslim invaders" (quoted in Schultheis 2018). Before the 2016 Brexit referendum, the UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage capitalized on the fear of mass Muslim immigration to the UK. Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Freedom Party, went so far as to accuse many Muslims of homophobia (Brubaker 2017).

Taken together, the antagonistic difference between Europe and Islam is a constitutive element of European right-wing parties. These parties rely heavily on essentializing in order to create characters. They depict a one-dimensional picture of Muslims and Islam. Muslims and the Muslim world are stereotyped into a particular character. In these discourses, the Middle East's history, cross-cultural differences in the Muslim world, and the contribution of Muslim scientists and philosophers are glossed over with straightforward answers to who the villain, the victim, and the hero are and what needs to be done. European right-wing parties do not aim to understand and solve the problems associated with Muslims. Against the backdrop of rising Islamophobic sentiments among the public, they manipulate these problems to create a hero character for

themselves. In Islamophobic discourse, the severity of the problem of Islamization is equalized with these parties' determination to save Europe. The triumvirate of villains, victims, and heroes enables these parties to raise their profile in the European political arena.

Conclusion

This study showed that Islamophobic discourse adopted by European right-wing parties is more than constructing certain categorizations like "us." vs. "them" distinctions, but also it is based on character constructions. These parties use discursive tactics to strengthen the belief that Muslims constitute a credible threat to Europe and Europeans. Muslims are fit into a villain character based on the belief that all of them follow an agenda to steer Europe off in a certain direction. In this context, Europe, Europeans, and their national cultures are fit into a victim role with their constant exposure to the Islamic threat. The gravity of the Muslim threat is directly connected to these parties' strong determination to save Europe and Europeans. In other words, it is only through the vilification of Muslims that these parties construct themselves as heroes.

Discourses are crucial as they reproduce, mediate, and even reconstitute the ethos of the culture they emanate from (Malak 2005). They distort reality by simplifying the phenomenon they focus on (Trouillot 1995). Islamophobic discourse adopted by right-wing populist parties gives no room for a nuanced picture of Islam. It turns blind to moderate Muslims and Islamic practices, diversity in the Muslim world (Sharify-Funk 2013), and the rich rationalist tradition in Islamic thought (Crinic 2020). By focusing on the irreconcilable difference between Europe and Islam, these parties ignore the impacts of the developments that took place in the Muslim world between the eighth and thirteenth centuries on the European Renaissance and the modern scientific revolution (Lombard 2009 and Lyons 2010).

European science, mathematics, philosophy, theology, and literature drew inspiration from the contributions of Islamic and Arab scientists and thinkers. For example, Al-Khwārizmi (780-850) contributed to mathematics by developing a novel discipline called "algebra" (Green 2015). Avicenna (980–1037) contributed to the development of modern medicine. Averroes (1126-1198) had a huge impact on Christian philosophers, most importantly on Thomas Aquinas, one of the most influential medieval philosophers in Europe, with his comments on Aristotle. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) developed a theory on the cyclical development of civilizations before the emergence of European sociology (Crinic 2020). Arabic fables and stories inspired authors ranging from Geoffrey Chaucer to Miguel de Cervantes (Green 2015). By depicting a one-dimensional picture of Islam, these parties also portray a one-dimensional picture of European history and culture.

Islamophobic discourse also deliberately ignores the impact of colonialism that lies in the background of many problems the Muslim world suffers today. It also dismisses how Muslims become victims due to the increasing discriminatory attitudes as well as physical and online attacks against them in Europe (Strack 2021). It neither explains nor provides solutions to the root causes of increasing Muslim immigration, radicalization among Muslims, and obstacles that Muslims face in the process of their integration into their host societies. As such, it presents a barrier to the development of a constructive dialogue with Muslims in Europe.

Against the backdrop of Islamophobia itself becoming a threat to the democratic ethos, Europe needs to engage in deeper discussions about state–religion relations, multiculturalism, tolerance, and religious freedom. In this context, Muslims' perceptions of Europe, Europeans, and their integration problems offer fruitful avenues for future research. Studies on Muslims might reveal a different discourse on the triumvirate of villains, victims, and heroes. As underlined previously, all discourses distort reality in one way or another. Yet, the encounter between the dominant and the alternative discourses might vitalize the discursive space in Europe.

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1. The Rushdie Affair (also known as the Satanic Verses controversy) played an instrumental role in the growth of bias against Muslims in Europe and created a political climate conductive to Islamophobia. For a detailed analysis, see Green (2015).

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